

The Decrees of Artaxerxes I and the Seventy-Weeks Prophecy—Part Two

Can the beginning date for the seventy-weeks prophecy be determined from the historical narrative presented in Scripture? Can the seventy-weeks prophecy be explained by a day-for-a-year principle based on a decree issued by Artaxerxes I?

With the fall of Babylon came the end of seventy years of Babylonian domination, and with Babylon's demise came the beginning of the Achaemenid era as the Persian Empire continued to expand throughout Central Asia, the Middle East, and into Asia Minor.

Notably, this transition of empires was witnessed by the prophet Daniel who was able to conclude—by reason of the “books”—that some years remained until seventy years of desolation would be accomplished upon the city of Jerusalem. And so Daniel was moved to pray about the sanctuary at Jerusalem, and while Daniel was praying the angel Gabriel informed him that a coming period of trouble—lasting for “seventy weeks”—was “determined upon thy people and upon thy holy city” (Dan. 9:24, Webster).

However, this didn't mean that Jerusalem was expected to have only seventy weeks of troubles throughout its history as the capital city of the former Commonwealth of Israel.

We know this from secular history.

However, we also understand that from the context of a “people” and a related “prince” who “will destroy the city and the sanctuary,” it was made known to Daniel that a specific period of time was set aside to accomplish certain things leading up to and including the return of Jesus (Dan. 9:26, LEB).

Which brings us then to reexamine what the angel Gabriel said to Daniel.

Now, after Babylon was overthrown by the Medo-Persian Empire, Daniel was moved to pray about the national circumstances of his people and all of the tribes of Israel and the situation of the sanctuary at Jerusalem. And while Daniel was speaking in prayer: “even the man Gabriel, whom I had seen in the vision at the beginning, being caused to fly swiftly, touched me about the time of the evening oblation. And he informed me, and talked with me, and said, O Daniel, I am now come forth to give thee skill and understanding. At the beginning of thy supplications the commandment came forth, and I am come to shew thee; for thou art greatly beloved: therefore understand the matter, and consider the vision” (Dan. 9:21-23). [Author's emphasis throughout.]

Which brings us to ask a question.

What “vision” was the angel Gabriel referring to when he spoke to Daniel?

Interestingly, Daniel had seen the angel Gabriel in a vision at an earlier time, in the third year of King Belshazzar's reign, and in that particular vision Daniel saw a confrontation between a ram and a he-goat, and in regard to this vision Daniel was told that: “The ram which thou sawest having two horns are the kings of Media and Persia. And the rough goat is the king of Grecia: and the great horn that is between his eyes is the first king” (Dan. 8:20-21). And so from an historical perspective, the vision that Daniel received in the third year of Belshazzar's reign was—at that time—symbolically depicting a future conflict between the then rising Persian Empire and a yet to rise Greco-Macedonian Empire.

Giving us something to consider in regard to the visions and prophecies that were seen by Daniel during the reign of King Belshazzar of Babylon.

For we find in Babylonian history that King Nabonidus of Babylon had entrusted the governance of the kingdom to his son Belshazzar in the third year of his reign. Being understood as the same year Daniel was given the vision of four great beasts that rose from the churning sea, which was also the year that marked the beginning of Cyrus' struggle to overthrow the power of the Medes. And indeed the Medes were overthrown about three years later with the defeat of Astyages in the sixth year of Nabonidus' reign, when Cyrus assumed the Median throne at Ecbatana in c. 550 BCE.

Thus, Cyrus' conquest of the Medes, and the acquisition of Ecbatana's wealth, assured the continuing rise of the Persian Empire, even though the collapse of the Babylonian Empire was still more than a decade away, which may well explain why Daniel—in the third year of Belshazzar's reign—was “astonished at the vision” of the ram and he-goat, and why “none understood it” (Dan. 8:27, RV).

Implying then that the interpretation of the vision was without a context or explanation in the third year of Belshazzar's reign, which meant that the “skill and understanding” was not yet given to the prophet Daniel.

Which brings us to the third year of Cyrus the Great (c. 536/535 BCE).

For in that year, in the first month of Cyrus' third regnal year, Daniel was given a vision while he stood by the great river Hiddekel (Tigris), and in this vision he received a prophecy that confirmed the throne of the Persian kings until the beginning of those events that would usher in the Hellenistic Age. And in the context of this particular prophecy—regarding the kings of the north and south—we find a similar context in the prophecy associated with the vision of the ram and he-goat that was given to Daniel in the third year of King Belshazzar (Dan. 8:1-8; 10:1; 11:1-4). (LXX reads “Cyrus” instead of “Darius” in Daniel 11:1.)

Notably, the prophecy associated with the vision of the ram and he-goat—summarized

as the “vision of the evening and morning”—has a parallel in the prophecy concerning the kings of the “north,” and kings of the “south,” which typologically represent two world-impacting and divergent political spheres that will eventually affect the Middle East and the city of Jerusalem. And we can confirm this prophetic parallel by comparing the language of these two prophecies, which project a typology forward to the “time of the end” when “transgressors are come to the full,” and a ruler of “fierce countenance” who understands “dark sentences” comes to power, who has with him the “abomination that maketh desolate.” and he will continue until the “transgression of desolation” and the “indignation” comes to an end at Jerusalem (Dan. 8:13, 17, 19, 23-25; 11:31, 36, 40).

Thus, we are able to say that when Gabriel gave the seventy-weeks prophecy to Daniel, it was not apart from the context of these visions and prophecies. And this is understood from what Gabriel said to Daniel when he stated that seventy weeks are: “determined upon thy people and upon thy holy city, to finish the transgression [of desolation], and to make an end of sins, and to make reconciliation for iniquity, and to bring in everlasting righteousness, and to seal up the vision and prophecy, and to anoint the most Holy” (Dan. 9:24). (See also, Dan. 8:13, “transgression of desolation.”)

Leading us then to consider that the seventy-weeks prophecy is a synopsis of the capstone events that will at some time affect the world and in particular the Middle East. Which is limited to a period of seventy weeks that will “seal up the vision and prophecy,” and bring to a conclusion a coming world-wide geopolitical conflict by the direct intervention of Jesus (Mt. 24:22). (Gabriel's message about the seventy-weeks prophecy was not given to Daniel as a vision, but rather the angel Gabriel appeared as a “man” and explained something about a vision that was given to Daniel.)

Understandably, we are able to take Gabriel at his word when he said that a specific period of seventy weeks is yet determined

for the people and city of Jerusalem at a time when there is a significant political and military incursion into the Middle East. And this incursion will characteristically reflect a polarized north/south geopolitical divide that will involve many nations and political alliances, which reveals to us that the seventy-weeks prophecy is currently relevant to our geopolitical world.

However, because there exists a common interpretation of the seventy-weeks prophecy that attempts to explain Gabriel's message in terms of "prophetic years"—diminishing its current political relevance—we should review the validity of this presumed interpretation in the light of a decree issued by Artaxerxes I (Dan. 9:25).

Because the "prophetic years" are assumed to be dated to Artaxerxes' seventh year of reign.

Presumably foretelling the time of Jesus' birth and the beginning of his ministry.

Which is not possible with this interpretation.

And here is why.

First, the "day-for-a-year" principle—in regard to prophecy—is clearly outside the support of Scripture. Second, there is no such thing as "[prophetic years](#)," nor are such "years" to be applied arbitrarily to prophecies noted in Scripture. Third, there is no biblically documented decree regarding the rebuilding of Jerusalem to be found in a copy of the letter given to Ezra, and there is no biblical documentation of such a decree being given to Nehemiah in the 20th year of Artaxerxes I. (In Nehemiah 1:1-3 we find mention of Nehemiah's 20th year in Shushan, but there is no reference to the king's years and no reference to a specific king of Persia.)

Obliging us then to make a brief [examination of the chronology of the Persian kings](#) from the time of Cyrus II to the seventh year of Artaxerxes I, when it is supposed that such a decree was issued by the king regarding the restoration of Jerusalem. Noting in particular

that the application of the "prophetic years" hinges on how we account for the regnal years of the kings of Persia, and in particular the last year of the reign of Xerxes I and the seventh regnal year of Artaxerxes I.

Therefore, in order to figure the beginning of Artaxerxes' seventh year we must begin with the accession year of Cyrus II (called the Great) over the kingdom of Babylon beginning in his accession year of 539/538 BCE, which is reasonably understood to be the first year of Darius the Mede. And even though some assign an accession year to Darius the Mede, it is reasonably concluded that he was likely an appointed viceroy and so his first year would be the accession year of Cyrus II. Which means that the decree issued by Cyrus the Great regarding the restoration of temples and sanctuaries—in his first year of reign—may be dated to 538/537 BCE, and a relative copy of this decree is found recorded in the book of Ezra (Ezra 1:1-5).

Then, by a spring to spring reckoning, we see that Cambyses II, who was co-regent over Babylon, acceded to the throne of the Persian Empire with the death of his father, Cyrus the Great. Then came the reign of Hystaspes (satrap of Bactria), followed by the reign of his son Darius I (the Great), who upheld the decree of Cyrus II regarding the restoration of the sanctuary at Jerusalem (II Chron. 36:22-23).

Next came Xerxes I who died in the late summer of c. 465 BCE, which was in his last regnal year as ruler of the Persian Empire, which is the starting point for determining the seventh year of Artaxerxes I. Noting that Xerxes I's last year of reign, being his regnal year of 465/464 BCE, was the accession year of Artaxerxes I, which makes 464/463 BCE to be the first regnal year of Artaxerxes' reign over the Persian Empire.

Therefore, we may reasonably conclude that Artaxerxes' seventh regnal year began in c. 458 BCE, the beginning of which was in the spring of the year when Ezra left Babylon. Giving us some certainty in saying that Ezra received the letter from the king in the

preceding sixth regnal year of Artaxerxes I (459/458 BCE), which would allow some time to gather any acquirable gold and silver that remained in Babylon.

Bringing us then to this conclusion.

That we do not have any biblical or historical evidence to chronologically substantiate that the year c. 457 BCE is the starting date for the seventy-weeks prophecy, and consequently we are not able to validate an interpretation that would support the idea of 490 prophetic years, which supposedly foretold the beginning of Jesus' ministry.

So, what then is the significance of the seventy-weeks prophecy?

For those who believe in the concept of "prophetic years" there is little significance to be found in the multitude of interpretations created by this day-for-a-year concept, which is questionably cited as a proof of the validity of Scripture. And given that we are not able to use this method to determine the [beginning of Jesus' ministry](#), without distorting the biblical, historical and chronological records, we are pressed to admit that this interpretation must be abandoned for the sake of the other visions and prophecies given to Daniel.

Otherwise, the concept of "prophetic years" only serves to detract from the significant and timely geopolitical relevance of the seventy-weeks prophecy. Which brings us to consider something else about the vision of the ram and he-goat, and the prophecy concerning the kings of the south and the kings of the north. Because it has been concluded by some expositors that these geopolitical events were mostly fulfilled in the time period that spanned from the end of the Persian Empire to the end of the long-standing conflict between the Ptolemaic and Seleucid empires.

However, by making a careful examination of the historical record we can see that some prophetic interpretations and conclusions have been strained from history, while

ignoring the many unanswered issues and questions raised by the visions and prophecies given to Daniel. And if we examine the historical record in the light of the apparent ambiguity of Daniel's prophecies, it is clear that the individual who has a "fierce countenance," who is a parallel to the "king of the north," who has with him the "abomination that maketh desolate," is certainly not the historical figure known as Antiochus IV Epiphanes (Mt. 24:15). (Some have concluded that it was the emperor of Rome.)

Meaning then that much of what we read in the book of Daniel that pertains to these prophecies and visions is yet to be fulfilled, with the understanding that some of these events do indeed have some typologies in the historical events surrounding the end of the Persian Empire up to the end of the Hellenistic Age. And this means that even though the coming of Jesus is—in the scope of human history—still in the not-too-distant future, there still remains a number of years until these prophecies and visions are fulfilled before the return of Jesus.

Thus there still remains the expectation of a coming geopolitical upheaval in the future, and some of the international players for these events are now on the political field, which allows us to conclude that there are many changes ahead in this world in regard to international affairs, and there are yet some significant years ahead until the coming of Jesus and the establishment of the kingdom of God (Mt. 24:14). ^{now}
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